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AMCONSUL CAPE TOWN IMMEDIATE
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SUBJECT: PRE-ELECTION TOUR D'HORIZON WITH ELECTORAL
COMMISSION

Classified By: Classified by CDA Helen La Lime for reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶11. (C) Summary: The Chairperson of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) of South Africa gave us a glimpse into the operation of an institution key not only to the successful conduct of the 2009 elections but also to the preservation of South Africa's young democracy. The IEC officials briefed Charge, Acting DCM, and POL on preparations for upcoming elections, including court-mandated voting for registered overseas citizens. They discussed the pre-election climate, from increased voter registration to preparations to head off potential violence in certain flash point areas. They explained how the innovative South African model, which constitutionally guarantees the independence of the IEC, while providing direct SAG funding through the Treasury, has created a solid institutional platform to mount post-election efforts to educate South Africans on citizenship in a democracy. End summary.

2009, A Rare Opportunity

¶12. (C) Calling on Charge on March 17, Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) Chairperson Dr. Brigalia Bam and Deputy Chairperson Thoko Mpumlwana remarked that the IEC does not normally visit foreign embassies so close to election time but had made an exception to brief us. (Note: Dr. Bam had never before visited the U.S. Embassy. End note). Acting DCM, Political Counselor and Deputy also participated in the meeting. Asked about IEC's staffing in the run-up to April 22 elections, Bam said IEC staff numbers about 900 with 200-300 based in Pretoria and the remainder in provincial and municipal offices throughout South Africa's nine provinces. This number will expand to approximately 200,000 on election day in order to staff close to 2,000 polling stations nationwide. Special voting will take place on March 20-21 for disabled voters and others who qualify for early voting.

¶13. (SBU) Asked whether the IEC is ready to implement overseas voting for registered South Africans as mandated by a recent Constitutional Court ruling, Bam responded without hesitation, "We are on top of it." Bam and Mpumlwana said the IEC will increase the number of ballots to South African embassies overseas, but they would not speculate on the number of overseas votes expected to be cast in light of the ruling. Registered overseas voters have until March 21 to inform the IEC of their intention to vote. Based on this information, ballots will be sent via diplomatic pouch to overseas missions. Overseas voting will take place on April 17, and the absentee votes will be counted along with the in-country votes starting on April 22 after polls close at 9:00 p.m.

¶4. (C) Comparing the U.S. and South African electoral systems, Dr. Bam told us she was in the U.S. for the 2008 elections and confessed that she found the pervasive sense of election-inspired excitement there infectious. She also was impressed by the high level of trust Americans have in their system and expressed the hope that South Africans would have the same degree of trust in their system one day. Bam raised the same degree of trust in their system one day. Bam raised the possibility that there might be an "Obama factor" at work in South Africa's high voter registration figures this year. She said she timed a major voter registration drive to follow U.S. elections in November to gain a bounce in local interest. Another possibility, according to the IEC officials, is that 2009 is a year of political realignment. The number of registered parties is now 156, the highest ever, but only 41 of them will compete at the national level for parliament, and the remainder will be limited to provincial contests. Mpumplwana commented that people are exploring political space in a new way and commented that fractures in the African National Congress (ANC) may have helped create a sense of possibility. Both IEC officials commented that today's young South Africans are debating political ideas on the basis of self-interest and/or principles and do not feel bound by historical loyalty to the ANC. They added that the older generation, those who remember apartheid harassment, still associate liberation and post-apartheid benefits with Mandela and the ANC. (Note: At the March 11 public signing of the Election Code of Conduct, Dr. Bam lectured political party leaders that it is their responsibility to involve South Africans in government and their duty to ensure the integrity of the process. End note.)

Systems in Place to Conduct Elections

¶5. (SBU) Dr. Bam was eager to tell us about new IEC developments. She said that in past elections, polling stations had to make due with partial lists comprised of the voter roles for municipalities and provinces. With the 2009 elections, poll workers in each polling station will have access to the 23.2 million list of voters on a computer zip drive, which will allow registered voters to vote on the national list from any polling station in the country. Offering background on how the IEC developed, Bam said that as a new democracy, South Africa had the luxury of models to choose from in developing the IEC, adding that some IEC features are borrowed and adapted from the Australian and Canadian systems.

¶6. (SBU) Returning to election nuts and bolts, Bam said that votes will be counted manually at each polling station. Local results will be sealed and transported to central counting stations where they will be opened in the presence of auditors and party representatives. The counting stations have systems in place that will check for anomalies, such as a 100 percent turn out, or greater, at a polling station. Bam said she expected results 3-4 days after the election. The IEC officials told us that votes from Robben Island are typically the first to be tallied due to the relatively small number of votes, making the site of Mandela's former prison cell the Dixville Notch of South Africa.

¶7. (C) Regarding the possibility of election day violence, Bam said the strongest possibility of violence is in Kwazulu Natal Province (KZN) where a battle between the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party has already resulted in violent clashes. Bam said that additional police had already been deployed and that military forces would be on standby to deploy, if needed, to flash points. The IEC officials expressed hope that the recent public ceremonial signing of the Election Code of Conduct would deter violence. They said the parties themselves do not want the embarrassment of violence by their supporters to cloud the election.

IEC Welcomes U.S. Observers

¶8. (C) Bam and Mpumlwana welcomed news that the U.S. Mission plans to deploy teams of election observers throughout South Africa, but she declined to allow our LES staff members to vote early, explaining that she could not afford to make an exception to strict limitations set on early voting as a matter of principle. Bam said that international observers are welcome, adding the IEC had sent an invitation to the Carter Center, albeit a late invitation.

¶9. (SBU) Bam said the IEC also accepts contributions. She clarified that the IEC cannot accept contributions for its operational work and overhead costs, which are funded directly from the South African Treasury, but it can accept funding for training and voter education. Bam said that IEC is working closely with community radio stations to produce debates on local issues. She said South Africa needs help in educating its citizens on democracy and how to use the nation's constitution. The IEC wants to do more to support and promote citizenship as a positive value among the young and would be grateful for international support in this effort. Bam noted that the Government of Japan had provided \$2 million for a voter education pamphlet and that the Government of Finland is providing support for community radio, adding that the Governments of Ireland and the Netherlands also support IEC programs. Acting DCM offered to explore public diplomacy support for the IEC's domestic citizenship/education mandate. In closing, the Charge invited Bam and Mpumlwana for a luncheon at their earliest convenience to discuss possibilities for U.S. cooperation with the IEC in the future.

Comment

¶10. (C) The IEC has become one of the most respected institutions in South Africa, its innovative model combining guaranteed independence with guaranteed funding. The IEC has played significant roles in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Lesotho in carrying out regionally supervised elections. We think IEC's confidence that it has the systems and experienced officials needed to conduct the 2009 elections successfully is well founded. Moreover, the IEC is uniquely well placed as an institution to spearhead a national sustained effort through community radio and other programs, to promote good citizenship and advance civic education. The public diplomacy office will be meeting with the IEC's permanent unit for on-going democracy training after the elections to identify programs and products.

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